

ARMY TIMES 25 October 1982

Plugging Leaks

The administration, in recent months, has been trying to plug news leaks. Almost every administration has become worried about its members' becoming too talkative and each has tried to curb their tongues.

Each time the subject comes up, the news media protest that the First Amendment is being threatened and the public's right to know is being abridged.

Our political system requires that the government operate in the public view. Public officials, particularly some in the military, often wish that were not the case. It would be much easier to operate on a "need-to-know" basis, with the government deciding who needs to know what. That's the system used in many totalitarian governments, but, fortunately, that's not the rule here.

Nor do officials want to stop all leaks. What they want is to block the flow of information that they would rather not have publicized. Every Washington reporter is fed information that the government departments want out, but, for various reasons, don't want to put out in official news releases.

Many officials, including some in the Pentagon, welcome efforts to control the news flow. They will use administrative orders to restrict media access. That usually is a mistake.

For one thing, it damages a department's credibility. A reporter who is cut off from the prime sources of information quite naturally is suspicious of what is put out in the official "handouts."

For another, there is no way to plug all the leaks. When responsible officials are forbidden to talk with the press, someone else always will. That someone may be the least-informed, most-disgruntled employee in the department. Such people often have a compulsion to tell everything they know — and a little more. If they are the only sources available, the news will be skewed far more than it would have been had knowledgeable people been allowed to respond honestly.

Finally, trying to plug leaks tends to make burrowing moles of otherwise mild-mannered reporters. There is something in the nature of the newshound that makes him want to dig — not where the ground is soft and yielding — but where it is hard and resistant. If he can't get the story, sometimes the resistance becomes part of the story. And government unresponsiveness can be a more damaging revelation than whatever it was the government was being unresponsive about.

SECRET

ROUTING AND RECORD SHEET

SUBJECT: (Optional)

IG/CM Tasking on Damage Assessments

CMC-12

FROM:

Chairman, SECOM

EXTENSION

NO.

SECOM-D-395

DATE

8 December 1982

TO: (Officer designation, room number, and building)

DATE

RECEIVED

FORWARDED

OFFICER'S INITIALS

COMMENTS (Number each comment to show from whom to whom. Draw a line across column after each comment.)

DD/P&M

SECRET

052 2992
X052 2635